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Cornerstone of Buffalo Soldier history, Arizona's Camp Naco, Awarded \$3.5 Million

December 9, 2022 (BISBEE, ARIZONA) — Today, the Mellon Foundation has approved a grant of \$3.5 million to the City of Bisbee to support the Naco Heritage Alliance with the rehabilitation and enhancement of historic buildings, new public programming, and artist and scholar residencies at Camp Naco. The nationally significant, hundred-year-old adobe military camp sits just 600 yards north of the US-Mexican border. In May of this year, this site was named as one of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The Mellon Grant is in addition to a \$4.6 million grant Bisbee received from the Office of Arizona Governor Doug Ducey on October 27th for Camp Naco.

"The City of Bisbee, the Community of Naco, the Naco Heritage Alliance, the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and our many partners are honored to accept this valuable assistance from the Mellon Foundation. We have been working for twenty years to preserve the Camp, and now we will be able to continue some much-needed restoration of these historic buildings and tell the fascinating story of this place. Much of our momentum was lost as a result of the pandemic and we are eager get moving again. The result will be a living museum of Buffalo Soldier History, the Mexican Revolution and a place for tourism, arts and culture. It will also create a sense of place and provide more community resources in Naco." said Steve Pauken, Bisbee's City Manager.

Recognizing the significance of Camp Naco and its contributions to the area, Bisbee Mayor Ken Budge observed, “Camp Naco and its cultural and military importance are valuable assets to our community and the region. We cannot allow this iconic place to melt back into the desert. We hope this listing will renew interest from regional, state and national interests who see the value in protecting this place and converting it for needed community resources.”

“Camp Naco is an important physical reminder of the legacy and contributions of African American Buffalo Soldier regiments who—in spite of serving in a segregated military—protected America’s economic and political interests as the railroads expanded westward and Mexico experienced political unrest in the early decades of the 20th century,” said Katherine Malone-France, Chief Preservation Officer of the National Trust. “With support and partnerships, Camp Naco can once again play a critical role by providing needed community and educational services while highlighting the full history of the many peoples who have shaped this region.”

Camp Naco is a touchstone for the history of the Buffalo Soldiers and the proud tradition of Black military regiments after the Civil War. Constructed by the U.S. Army in 1919, these adobe buildings are the only ones remaining from the 35 permanent camps built during that time along the U.S.-Mexico border. After the camp was decommissioned in 1923, the site passed through multiple owners and has suffered from vandalism, exposure, erosion and fire. The City of Bisbee now owns Camp Naco and is working closely with the Naco Heritage Alliance, SHPO, Buffalo Soldier organizations and other partners to identify critical funding that will help restore the historic camp buildings and revive them for community, tourism and educational uses.

The Camp’s fragile adobe barracks and officers’ housing embody the story of the U.S. Government’s early twentieth-century efforts to protect the Border, when the 9th and 10th Cavalry, known as the “Buffalo Soldiers,” helped to stabilize the U.S.–Mexico border area during the Mexican Revolution. Over the last decade, growing recognition of the importance of the segregated African American military has fostered new interest in the site. Rebecca Orozco of the Naco Heritage Alliance, an advocacy organization founded in 2008, said, “This funding is an important step in recognizing the need to preserve this nationally important historic asset.” Orozco continued, “It will support the City of Bisbee’s proposed adaptive reuse of the site into a community center to serve the rural community of Naco and to support heritage programming, visitation and tourism in southern Arizona.”

Charles Hancock of the Southwest Association of Buffalo Soldiers shared the feelings of Buffalo Soldier organizations throughout Arizona when he said, “Camp Naco symbolizes the honorable service these men provided to our country. Once repaired and back in service, it will continue to celebrate their legacy and share their proud history with future generations.”

The City of Bisbee acquired the property in 2018, working closely with the Naco Heritage Alliance and the State Historic Preservation Office to protect this important piece of Arizona and national history by stabilizing the 23 buildings, repairing damaged roofing, and hiring specialists to advise on adobe restoration. To begin bringing Camp Naco back as a community asset, they hope to rehabilitate the former Officers’ Club and the Hospital Building to create classroom and public meeting space for the community, share a museum dedicated to the Buffalo Soldiers stationed here, and restore the Parade Grounds as an outdoor space for a wide range of community events. State Historic Preservation Officer Kathryn Leonard observes “activation of this nationally significant historic property for community use will not only ensure its long-term preservation, but also serve as an important catalyst for heritage tourism and rural economic development in Southern Arizona.”

Helen Erickson, University of Arizona faculty member and board member of the Naco Heritage Alliance, has worked over the past year with Arizona Humanities funding support to develop an interpretive website and story map for Camp Naco. At the Arizona Historic Preservation Conference this month, the Story Map won the Governor’s Award for Heritage Preservation and the James W. Garrison Grand Award. She noted, “Because of the fragile nature of mud adobe construction and the location of Camp Naco along this international border, without intervention and a new use for this remarkable place, this essential piece of borderlands history will be lost. We must act now.”

Jeffrey Jennings, Deputy to the Commanding General at Fort Huachuca said “Camp Naco is a vital part of the US Army’s history in the Southwest. Protecting the Southern border was an early Army requirement which brought cavalry Soldiers, including the famous “Buffalo Soldiers” to the Arizona Territory. From the Punitive expedition to the battle of Ambos in 1918, the US Army and Buffalo Soldiers have figured prominently protecting southern border from attack. It is important we preserve our southwest history through these important historic sites, and through the eyes of those men who served. Buffalo Soldiers, like those of the 10th US Cavalry who fought in both engagements mentioned above were fighting the enemy and discrimination of the early 19th century must be honored and remembered”

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ABOUT THE NACO HERITAGE ALLIANCE

The work of the [Naco Heritage Alliance](#) will ensure that Camp Naco, and the history and contributions of the Buffalo Soldiers who served there, is not only accessible now, but also preserved for future generations.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

The [National Trust for Historic Preservation](#), a privately funded nonprofit organization, works to save America's historic places.

STORY RESOURCES - [History of Camp Naco and the Naco Heritage Alliance](#)

PHOTOGRAPHY - [Images available here](#)

VIDEO - [Why we must preserve Camp Naco](#)

INTERVIEWS

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ONLINE SOURCES

- [Facebook webpage](#), Naco Heritage Alliance
- [Camp Naco webpage](#), AZGeo
- [Camp Naco webpage](#), City of Bisbee
- [Saving Camp Naco](#), Archaeology Southwest
- [11 Most Endangered Historic Places webpage](#), National Trust for Historic Preservation
- [National Register of Historic Places Nomination](#)
- [Mellon Foundation](#)

PROJECT BACKGROUND

For 20 years an informal coalition of community volunteers has fought to preserve this unique site from being lost. In 2008 Rebecca Orozco and Debby Swartzwelder Jones—with help from the Naco Community and the Naco Fire District—formed the Naco Heritage Alliance, a non-profit devoted to the preservation of the Camp. With the assistance of [Archaeology Southwest](#) and architectural historian Jennifer Levstik, the property was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Fundraising efforts have made it possible to replace the asbestos roofing and begin stabilization of the buildings deemed most at risk of structural failure. Fences have been installed to deter vandalism and arson, but much remains to be done. Volunteer workdays coordinated by the City of Bisbee, Archaeology Southwest and the Naco Heritage Alliance have attracted members of the surrounding community as well as supporters of Buffalo Soldier History, including the Buffalo Soldiers Motorcycle Club of Sierra Vista and the Southwest Association of Buffalo Soldiers. In 2021 Arizona Humanities funded the development of a Camp Naco story map, which was completed by a project team under the direction of University of Arizona faculty member Helen Erickson. The story map won two awards in October of 2022 at the Arizona Historic Preservation Conference; the Governor’s Award for Heritage Preservation and the James W. Garrison Grand Award.

HISTORY OF CAMP NACO

Beginning in 1910, the Mexican Revolution led to a decade of unrest at the U.S.–Mexico border. Increasingly concerned with arms and ammunition smuggling and the potential for violence crossing over into the United States, the U.S. military constructed a string of temporary camps along its border with Mexico, from Brownsville, Texas, to Nogales, Arizona. One of these was a tent camp, established in 1911 at the point where the railroad crossed from Naco, Sonora, into Naco, Arizona. Naco quickly became a significant port of entry linking the rich American-controlled mines at Cananea, Sonora, to the processing centers at Bisbee/Douglas.

Naco, Sonora, was attacked by rebel Mexican forces several times. When the rebels gained control of the city in 1913, Mexican Federal troops fled into Arizona and surrendered to the U.S. military at Fort Huachuca in Sierra Vista. In 1914 forces loyal to Pancho Villa laid siege to the Federal garrison in Naco Sonora for 114 days. Troops from the 9th and 10th Cavalry regiments were dispatched to Camp Naco to protect U.S. citizens and maintain peace. Enforcing neutrality laws not only required keeping violence from spreading across the border, but also forbade any direct engagement with Mexican troops even when under attack. The Cavalry’s exemplary service in this regard was commended by the Secretary of War in 1914.

With the end of World War I in 1918, the military found funds to build 35 permanent camps along the border in a “fence” from Brownsville, Texas, to Nogales, Arizona. Of these camps, only the buildings of Camp Naco survive today.

More than 30,000 American troops manned these posts to provide border security, discouraging gun runners, bandits and cattle thieves. Constructed in 1919 at the site of the former tent camp, Camp Naco was unique in that it was built almost entirely of adobe, a circumstance which explains its survival to the present day. When other border camps were eventually deconstructed and materials were recycled elsewhere, its adobe construction meant that the camp remained largely undisturbed.

After the camp was decommissioned and turned over to private ownership in 1923, it was occupied briefly by the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps), who were responsible for much of the public work in Arizona during the Great Depression. In 1950 the Newell family—original property owners—regained possession and lived there until 1990, when it was sold to private interests. After several years of ownership in the early 2000’s by the Town of Huachuca City, the City of Bisbee acquired ownership of the camp in 2018.